

## French Materialist Feminism and Amanda Wingfield

Despite having a limited cast, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*'s characters are incredibly memorable, and perhaps none more (regrettably) so than the histrionic Amanda Wingfield. Living in a small apartment with her two adult children in the 1930's, Amanda is cringe worthy at the best of times with her constant nagging and breaks from reality, and detestable at the worst with her overly dramatic reactions, paranoia, and willingness to guilt trip her family, especially Tom. While not being an easy or desirable character to sympathize with, Amanda and her situation can perhaps be better understood if viewed through a feminist lens, specifically one with a French materialist feminist view. By helping illustrate how Amanda is defined and boxed in by the patriarchy that exists around her, materialist feminism (and concepts from materialist feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Christine Delphy, and Colette Guillaumin) can make Amanda Wingfield a character perhaps more worthy of understanding and sympathy.

It is important to view the parameters in which Amanda Wingfield exists as a person if there is to be any further understanding of how or why her character is the way that she is. To frame this, it might help to consider the question, "Who is Tom Wingfield?" The disgruntled and unhappy warehouse worker who supports his family frequents the cinema and narrates the play. Then who is Amanda Wingfield? The obvious answer is Tom's mother. While this is true, it's worth considering why a reader wouldn't answer the question as in-depth as Tom's role was defined (for example, it is also true that Amanda is a southern belle turned lower class, selling magazines and caring for Tom and Laura). This is important because it illustrates Beauvoir's idea that the patriarchy creates a state where "women have meaning only in relation to men" (Tyson 96). That is, the patriarchy that exists (in both the world and the world of the play) boxes in Amanda to the roles of a mother and a(n) (abandoned) wife.

While it is downplayed because of the absence of the husband/father, Amanda's position as a wife also shapes how she is confined. One of Beauvoir's ideas suggest that the institute of marriage actually "trapped and stunted" the women who joined in the marital unions. Christine Delphy builds on Beauvoir's idea of a social trap by stating that marriage "is a labor contract that ties women to unpaid domestic labor" (Tyson 97). But that would suggest that since Amanda's husband has been long gone, she might have some degree of freedom. However, Delphy goes on to explain that "The husband's only obligation [. . .] is to provide for his wife's basic needs" (Tyson 98). Having abandoned his family, Mr. Wingfield has broken free of his end of the labor contract and does not provide the needs he owes Amanda (wages to survive on), yet Amanda must still hold up her part of the contract (with domestic labor).

Despite the broken contract her husband left her with, Amanda is left to fulfill her role as physically appropriated with what Guillaumin refers to as *sexage*, or what is essentially serfdom. Guillaumin, a French materialist feminist, describes that men are defined and valued based on their contribution to the workforce where as women are defined by their sex and treated as property to be given away through the institute of marriage (Tyson 98-99). This all leads to women's bodies being physically appropriated by men for labor (in the workplace and domestically). While some forms of this appropriation require a woman's sexual obligation or body, the specific *sexage* that Amanda is left to fulfill is the obligation she has as a woman to care for family members who can't care for themselves, on top of caring for the healthy male family members (Tyson 99). Laura is unable to cope with reality due to a combination of mental obstacles and the disability of her limp, and therefore cannot live on her own, falling directly into what is Amanda's jurisdiction according to the male dominated society she exists in. Amanda even takes care of Tom, cooking for him and worrying about him, even if her interactions are painful to read. Her perceived duty to her children (reinforcing the idea of the domestic servitude owed in the concept of *sexage*) almost seems an inescapable prophecy. Amanda, annoying and nagging though she may be, does attempt to help her children better their lives so they don't have to be taken care of by her. Amanda spent fifty dollars on Laura's tuition at Rubicam's Business College in hopes

that Laura would be able to have a career (Williams 14). Amanda worries equally over Tom, especially over his whereabouts when he goes out drinking and to the movies, only wanting him to succeed in his career as well. Yet despite her hopes and efforts, Laura's condition prevents her from attending the business school and Tom eventually runs and takes the source of income with him, leaving Amanda still stuck in her sexage duties to care for Laura.

Materialist feminism can also shed light on the material/economic conditions that Amanda exists in and is limited to. The audience feels resentful with Tom because of the burden he carries being the sole provider for the Wingfield household. This resentment is to be expected: Tom is young and has dreams beyond the drab apartment and life he is forced to lead. Even Amanda, despite her attempts to sometimes appear the powerful family head despite Tom footing the rent, admits her dependency on Tom by telling him "[. . .] you're my right hand bower! Don't fall down, don't fail!" (Williams 30). But there is little Amanda can do to alleviate the financial pressure on him. In the 1930's, less than 25% of women had jobs, and even fewer married women were present in the workforce due to the hostility they faced in the work place, and government acts restricted married women's ability to gain employment ("Working Women in the 1930's"). Amanda does make an attempt at income by selling magazine subscriptions, but is generally snubbed by her would-be customers, who hang up the phone on her (Williams 20).

Amanda is punished the two times she seems to step out of the bounds of patriarchal society. This happens once in the form of her being a wife without a husband (regardless of his fault) where she must continue her domestic labor contract without the help of her partner, and again when she attempts to break from her sexage obligations to her family members by encouraging them to succeed on their own, rather than being content to take care of them herself indefinitely. Amanda may have the agreeableness and personality of something closer to battery acid, but she is still a victim of the social constraints placed on her by the patriarchal society she exists in. The reader can fail to sympathize with Amanda because he or she is fueled by experiencing the situation through Tom's emotions added on top of the reader being unaware of the social constraints that prevent Amanda from creating a better situation.

## Works Cited

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